

## Relational Epistemologies for a Living Planet

How do we go about arriving at “truths”, together? Not “timeless” truths, but useful truths, situated ones, something that helps *this* group, *this* organization, *this* community, find its own way forward? As a practitioner of group facilitation, I have developed certain practical knowledge about this; as a theorist and researcher-in-training, I have begun to explore long-standing questions about how our conventional cognitive habits might create difficulties for this work. In this essay, I will be exploring a variety of academic theorists who question our ingrained cultural assumptions about argumentation, while also pointing to some useful alternatives.

Forty years ago, in *Metaphors We Live By*, cognitive linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson invited us to become more conscious of our cultural patterns by observing how arguments, one aspect of our society’s search for truth, are organized through the metaphor of “war” (he “attacked” my position, she “defended” her thesis):

ARGUMENT is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of WAR. [...] The language of argument is not poetic, fanciful, or rhetorical; it is literal. We talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way – and we act according to the way we conceive things. (1980, p. 5)<sup>1</sup>

Lakoff and Johnson point out that even “rational argument”, the specialized subset of argument that prevails in the worlds of academia, law, and diplomacy, is still structured by war. Ostensibly restricted to stating premises, citing evidence, and drawing logical conclusions, “there is still a position to be established and defended, you can win or lose, you have an opponent whose position you attack and destroy and whose argument you try to shoot down” (p. 64). Their examples show how there is often present, in a subtle form, “the ‘irrational’ and ‘unfair’ tactics that rational arguments in their ideal form are supposed to transcend” (p. 65).

On the whole, academic culture as a whole still lacks a coherent alternative to the culture of argumentation. Here is the experience of AnaLouise Keating, multicultural women’s and gender studies professor:

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<sup>1</sup> Lakoff and Johnson’s work on the metaphorical foundations of language was part of their invitation to move beyond the “myth of objectivism” and the “myth of subjectivism” to “the experientialist alternative” where “understanding emerges from interaction” (1980, p. 230).

My undergraduate and graduate work trained me to think oppositionally, to structure my articles and book chapters as a series of binary discussions that proceed through nuanced contrasts: first, describe other scholars' theories and perspectives; second, demonstrate the limitations in their views; third, explain why my views are superior to those of other scholars; fourth, persuade readers to reject the other scholars' views and embrace mine. I've developed an oppositional toolkit – an arsenal, as it were – filled with all sorts of strategies, methods, and approaches that enable me to poke holes in other people's arguments, demonstrate the flaws in their thinking, and persuade readers that my theories are better – more all-encompassing, more insightful, more effective, more worthy of respect. In short, I've been trained to demonstrate that my perspectives are right and those of others are wrong. (2013, p.2)

Similarly to how racist and sexist biases permeate our culture by being embedded in each one of us, Keating bears witness to how the tendency to engage in “oppositional thinking” is also within each one of us. What to do about this? Lakoff and Johnson see the underlying metaphorical structure of language as foundational; we cannot simply “do away with” metaphor, but we *can* consciously replace the metaphors that currently structure our experience with different ones<sup>2</sup>. If we seek alternatives to warring for truth, what metaphors might help us to do so, and what theoretical understandings would support this shift?

These were some of my questions as I began to work on this essay, with the intention of creating a mosaic from the work of relevant thinkers in various disciplines, following connections in a process of ongoing learning, and highlighting common threads while also acknowledging contrasts and differences. Some of my original starting points were the work of English professor and writing teacher Peter Elbow<sup>3</sup>, who offers a critique of conventional critical thinking; community psychologist and researcher Shawn Wilson, who has written about Indigenous research paradigms, and philosopher and psychoanalyst Gemma Corradi Fiumara, who has written extensively about the philosophy of listening.

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<sup>2</sup> Since each metaphor patterns our experience by highlighting some aspects while occluding others, it is helpful to replace a metaphor with *several* alternatives, rather than just one.

<sup>3</sup> Thank you to Karl Hebenstreit for introducing me to the work of Peter Elbow.

## Limits of Critical Thinking

Before proceeding, I want to acknowledge that a “critique of critical thinking” may sound strange in our current circumstances. Given the amount of intentionally-created disinformation in our world today, it seems self-evident that critical thinking skills are sorely needed, especially the kind of critical thinking that goes beyond logic and argument analysis to include contextual, relational, and ethical factors (Lim, 2015; see also Thayer-Bacon, 1998).

At the same time, recent discoveries in cognitive science and social psychology on “motivated reasoning” underline the ineffectiveness of rational argumentation for arriving at common understanding across significant differences; the current scientific consensus is that most human beings engage in confirmatory thinking (rather than exploratory thinking) most of the time, even on trivial issues; much more so, on issues with a strong emotional valence. It seems that “confirmation bias is a built-in feature (of an argumentative mind), not a bug that can be removed (from a platonic mind)” (Haidt, 2012, p.105). Thus, while “critical thinking” may be necessary for deciding what information to consider as valid, it works less well for building understanding with others of a different persuasion. No matter how logical we might be, nor how many facts we may use to “arm” ourselves, conversations structured by the underlying metaphor of “argument is war” are unlikely to be effective at finding common ground with those who hold very different perspectives. This is precisely where the work of practitioner Dave Fleisher and researchers David Brookman and Joshua Kalla offers some hopeful alternatives.

A news article with the catchy title “Research Says There are Ways to Reduce Racial Bias. Calling People Racist Isn’t One of Them” (Lopez, 2018) was my first encounter with Brookman and Kalla’s research (2018) on reducing intergroup prejudice. While neither that article nor the original research paper fully describe the actual intervention, some additional digging led to organizer Dave Fleischer’s “deep canvassing” model (Resnick, B., 2016). In his own words:

The key to changing people’s minds is to be curious about what other people think. Think back to the last time you changed your mind about something important. It likely wasn’t because someone berated you. The biggest gift you can give someone whose mind you want to change is a supportive environment that lets them think about their experiences and how those experiences affect their opinions on issues. We’re just beginning to learn how to do this well, but [...] the data shows it works. (Fuid, 2017)

Subsequent peer-reviewed research (Kalla & Brookman, 2020) explores more deeply the role played by sharing narratives in a non-judgmental context. As Resnick (2020) describes it, “If you want to change someone’s mind, you need to have patience with them, ask them to reflect on their life, and listen. It’s not about calling people out.”

The “White Ally Toolkit” is another process that works with listening, empathic understanding, dialogue, and storytelling to honorably influence others and decrease racist attitudes (Campt, 2018; Williams, 2018)<sup>4</sup>, though unlike the Deep Canvassing model, it has not been empirically validated. Both Campt’s and Fleisher’s work could be seen as responses to the question posed by Stanford professor Paula M. L. Moya (2012): “If we cannot fight racism with facts, then how can we fight it?”. Moya goes on to wonder, “How might we go about the process of changing people’s emotional horizons – which is clearly a part of what needs to happen if the problem of racism is to be ameliorated?” (p. 174).

Campt and Fleisher’s models both aim to “change people’s emotional horizons” through a reflective, non-judgmental engagement. At the same time, Kalla and Brookman (2000) are clear about the tension between what works at the individual level and what works at the societal level. They refer to previous research showing that social norms which signal that “exclusionary behaviors will be judged negatively by others” can be effective for changing behavior, even though they do *not* appear to affect underlying attitudes. Thus, at the societal level, it makes sense to have laws and consequences; at the same time, having particular listening spaces where “individuals will *not* be judged negatively for expressing exclusionary attitudes” can be a key part of helping to facilitate attitudinal change (p. 33, emphasis in the original).

Unfortunately, the latter are all too rare in our culture; it may be that the underlying metaphor of ‘argument is war’ helps perpetuate the belief, against the preponderance of the evidence, that we can somehow reduce prejudice by logic, facts, or righteousness. To explore this broader topic further, I will now turn to Peter Elbow’s work.

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<sup>4</sup> To clarify, Campt is calling for European-American people to use these approaches with their family members, friends, and colleagues; he is *not* placing the burden on marginalized peoples.

## The Doubting Game and the Believing Game

From Elbow's perspective, both critical thinking and empathic thinking (the "doubting game" and the "believing game") are necessary for a more holistic approach to reason. Elbow is quick to point out that he is not against critical thinking, which he also terms "methodological doubting" or skeptical thinking; he is just noting the limitations of its one-sided use:

In practice, critical doubting tends to function as a way to help people *fend off* criticisms of their own ideas or ways of seeing. Intellectual and academic interchange suffers badly from participants spending too much time fending off criticisms of their *own* views, and not spending enough time *listening* to views they experience as wrong, different, odd, alien, or unfashionable. (Booth & Elbow, 2005, p. 390, emphasis in the original)

As a corrective, the "believing game" can be a helpful way for people to take on the perspective of another person, or to "enter into" a new idea. This not only helps us to understand another person, it can also lead us to see the flaws in our own perspective: "Our best hope for finding invisible flaws in what we can't see in our own thinking is to enter into *different* ideas or points of view — ideas that carry different assumptions (Elbow, 2006, p. 21, emphasis in the original)<sup>5</sup>.

One of the classroom exercises Elbow uses to help students develop their skills in "methodological believing" or entering into another's world view, is asking them to restate a previous speaker's ideas to that person's satisfaction, before offering a different perspective. Other approaches he recommends include story, narrative, and poetry: "where doubting thrives on logic, assenting or believing thrives on the imagination and the ability to experience" (Booth & Elbow, 2005, p. 395). This resonates with Kalla and Brookman's work on sharing narratives in a non-judgmental context to generate new understandings.

Another result of the one-sided emphasis on the doubting game, is a limited ability to recognize the intelligence of those who are proficient at the "believing game":

Because of our current model of what good thinking looks like, most of us lack the lens or the language to see their ability — to dwell genuinely in ideas alien

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<sup>5</sup> I see a parallel here with Lakoff and Johnson's point earlier, that we can't simply "step out" of a metaphor that structures experience; instead, we need to replace it, even if temporarily.

from their own — as intellectual sophistication or careful thinking. When we see them listening and drawing out others, we call them generous or nice rather than smart. We don't connect good listening with intelligence, and we call creativity merely a mystery. [...] And because our intellectual model is flawed in these ways, we don't *teach* this ability to enter into alien ideas. (Elbow, 2008, p. 9, emphasis in the original)

Some of those who have built on Elbow's work include Blythe McVicker Clinchy, a developmental psychologist who along with Mary Field Belenky, Nancy Rule Goldberg, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, studied patterns of epistemological development in women. Since previous studies had only included male subjects, these researchers found Elbow's distinctions useful for conceptualizing the new patterns they were seeing, which they termed "separate knowing" and "connected knowing" (Clinchy, 2007a, 2007b, 1996; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, and Tarule, 1986).<sup>6</sup> In turn, their work has continued to influence others.

### **Reducing Oppositionality to Enhance Perspectivity**

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, one of the creators of black feminist standpoint epistemology, has also expressed concern about a one-sided emphasis on the adversary paradigm<sup>7</sup>, particularly in the context of classroom teaching. In an article on the role of perspectivity in the sociology classroom (2003), Collins explores how perspectivity — the acknowledgment that there *is* no "view from nowhere" (Plümacher, 2011)— can function as a constructive alternative to positivist knowledge projects, which claim to be "universal", "unbiased", and "objective" while remaining blind to their own biases. Collins describes these unacknowledged biases as a dichotomous world view where difference is defined in oppositional terms; where one pole of the difference is objectified; and where "domination based on difference" undergirds the conceptual system (2003, pp. 363-364).

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<sup>6</sup> Their original title ("Women's Ways of Knowing") was somewhat misleading since the authors did not claim that these patterns were exclusively associated with particular genders, only that their rate of prevalence differed. Their work was also criticized, along with that of other feminists deemed "essentialists", for its lack of attention to other dimensions of difference. For some relatively recent constructive engagement with Clinchy's work, see Meek (2007) and Yu (2007).

<sup>7</sup> I am seeing what Collins calls the "adversary paradigm" as having strong similarities to what Elbow calls the "doubting game" and what Keating calls "oppositional thinking".

Of particular relevance here, Collins explores how the “excessive use of the adversary paradigm” reduces the expression of perspectivity in the classroom, making it less likely that students will risk bringing their personal and cultural experiences to bear in a collaborative creation of knowledge. Instead, “what often passes for lively discussion is actually a verbal duel where neither side gains deeper understanding of the other’s stance and where both merely sharpen their defensive skills for the next calculated attack” (2003, p. 867).

For Collins, reclaiming perspectivity in the classroom addresses a larger purpose, “a fundamental issue of Eurocentric social science — how we view and use and feel about difference, and how this affects human action” (2003, p. 368). This engagement with difference begins with the recognition of people’s different experiences, and then proceeds to seeking understanding of “key components of others’ stances”, which in turn “sharpen understanding of the individual’s own angle of vision, and deepens it” (p. 369). Doing this requires the hard work of “being willing to engage in dialogue with others (as compared to adversarial debates)” (p. 370). This makes a further step possible. Building on Karl Mannheim’s work, Collins describes the larger purpose of “generating a comprehensive group stance that is inclusive yet recognizes the autonomy of individual stances” (p. 371). Instead of choosing among competing perspectives, the intention is to co-create “comprehensive analyses that account for differences without trying to eliminate them” (p. 371).

Collin’s “Black Feminist Thought”, published three years prior to her article on perspectivity, includes a chapter on black feminist epistemology describing its key features as the valuing of lived experience (pp. 275-279), the use of dialogue (pp. 279-281), an ethic of caring (pp. 281-284), and an ethics of personal accountability (pp. 284-285). In describing each of the first three elements Collins refers to Belenky et al.’s distinctions between separate knowing and connected knowing.

Especially evidenced in her article yet also in her book, I was also moved to discover Collins’ references to Mannheim’s work, which years ago had inspired me as an undergraduate.<sup>8</sup> A key founder of the sociology of knowledge, Mannheim saw major shifts in perspective as inevitable and indeed beneficial, writing that: “Nor is it to be regarded as intellectual incompetence on our part when an extraordinary broadening of perspective necessitates a throughgoing revision of our fundamental conceptions.” (p.

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<sup>8</sup> Following the breadcrumbs, I learned that Collins completed both her undergraduate and her doctoral work at Brandeis, where Mannheim’s work was deeply influential.

105). I like to imagine that he would have welcomed feminist thinking, especially Collins' black feminist standpoint epistemology, as one such 'extraordinary broadening of perspective'.

### **The Doubting Game and Social Change**

It is evident that the skepticism inherent in the doubting game has had significant value for disenfranchised peoples. Historically, critical thinking has served as an essential consciousness-raising tool for 'seeing through' established orthodoxies to validate our own experiences, whether as women, as people of color, as working class people, as gay people, or any other marginalized group. Otto Maduro, Latino philosopher and sociologist of religion, wrote the following about Latinas/os in the U.S., yet it is relevant for many other groups as well:

Latinas/os in the United States are often urged (by past experience, personal qualms, traditional wisdom, non-traditional approaches), to question, doubt, and challenge what they are concurrently pressured, expected, and/or taught by the dominant culture to accept as true. Such a predicament can at times result in the production of "counter-knowledges": alternative ideas, subversive discourses, dissident voices. (2012, p. 88)

Questioning, doubting, challenging — all of these elements of critical thinking are crucial initial steps for liberation. And yet, as Maduro goes on to point out, a one-sided emphasis on critique alone can end up being a destructive dead end:

One of the tragedies and tendencies of all knowledge produced within and under relations of oppression, exclusion, domination, and exploitation is that inadvertently, surreptitiously, at least part of the ruling patterns, relations, conceptions, and/or values permeating the larger society might be reintroduced. Thus, there's no guarantee that any counter-knowledge will forever and/or wholly avoid ending up reinforcing (rather than weakening) the prevailing ways of knowledge against which it emerged (viz., hierarchical, binary, authoritarian, patriarchal, racist, elitist ways of knowing). (2012, p. 88)

Keating, mentioned earlier, has also written extensively about the double-edged sword of oppositional discourse: "To be sure, oppositional politics and other forms of oppositional consciousness have been vital, enabling us to survive under hostile



conditions and make important social change. However, I question the long-term effectiveness of our oppositional politics and thinking” (2013, p. 3). Similarly to Elbow, Keating points out how an antagonistic approach creates blind spots in our own thinking:

Embattled and besieged, we harden ourselves to protect our current beliefs, values, theories, and worldviews. Because any slippage — any willingness to consider alternative perspectives — seems to weaken our position and expose us to attack, we refuse to seriously consider the limitations of our current perspectives. (2013, p.6)

Yet from a scholar-activist perspective, the damage goes further. Keating laments how “we internalize our oppositional approach so thoroughly that we use it against each other [...] and inhibit our ability to create transformational alliances” (p.7). In other words, the roots of “call-out culture” run deep, and academic cultures have not been innocent bystanders to this phenomenon.

For a deeper understanding of the harm caused by intensely imbalanced rationality, we can listen to Indigenous researchers who point out how scientists have been notorious for doubting the humanity of those who differ with regard to gender, skin color, and culture (Smith, 1999). This may be the logical conclusion of the doubting game taken to its extreme, dissociated from the ‘other half’ of reason — the empathic understanding which Elbow calls the believing game. From where I stand, it seems evident that a single-minded emphasis on ‘argument as battle’ is a hallmark of cultures of dominance, and destructive to human life and well-being; to the extent that we are seeking a deeper connection to life and to one another, we need alternative ways to arrive at useful truths together.

### **Research Is Ceremony**

In Indigenous Cree researcher Shawn Wilson’ relational approach to knowledge (2008), “relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality” (p. 7). As an organizing metaphor for welcoming other perspectives, Wilson offers a ceremonial fire circle:

Say you have a fire, and you have people sitting in a circle around the fire. And you ask any person to describe the fire. While they are describing it, and you are looking at the same fire, it's not the same thing. But that doesn't mean they are wrong. They are at a different vantage point altogether. So we say, if we share

this information in the circle, we share this experience, the collective experience; we will get a bigger picture. (p. 112)

In his paradigm of Indigenous research, Wilson explicitly negates the role of argumentation: "My role is not to draw conclusions for another or to make an argument. My role, based upon the guidelines of relationality and relational accountability, is to share information or to make connections with ideas" (p. 133). From this deeply relational perspective, we do well to be cautious about judging our relatives:

All ideas are developed through relationships. I cannot know the entirety of anyone else's relationship web. Without this knowledge, I cannot judge one over another. What may seem wrong from my perspective may be perfect from another perspective. Therefore all ideas may be equally valid. (p.134)

This downplaying of the role of criticism, in the context of a deep respect for others, is not an isolated instance in Wilson's work, but instead a recurring theme:

There is no need to be critical or judge others' ideas or theories if all are thought of as equally valid. Rather there is a need for each person to develop his or her own relationship with ideas and to therefore to form their own conclusions. (p. 94)

In an earlier exploration of Wilson's work, I noted that these ideas that are being described as being equally valid, are also described as provisional forms that are continually growing and evolving; thus, they feel quite different than the static Platonic entities of Western tradition. In addition, since these provisional and continually evolving ideas are being held within *an ongoing circle of community*, the picture feels quite different than the fragmented relativism of an extreme deconstructionist post-modernism:

From a classic Western perspective of disconnection and separation [...] seeing all ideas as equally valid might easily lead into chaos and anomie. Yet when our fundamental assumption is that we are all *already* connected, and when community means being engaged in an ongoing listening ceremony of deepening our relationships with one another, holding all of our provisional understandings as equally valid may yet lead us home. (Zubizarreta, 2014b)<sup>9[viii]</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> My distinction here between two very different ways of holding "all ideas as equally valid" was influenced by the work of Charlene Spretnak (1991), who distinguishes between deconstructive postmodernism and ecological postmodernism. In a later book, Spretnak notes that Lakoff and Johnson make a parallel distinction, naming a

In a similar way to how Elbow does not disparage critical thinking, Wilson does *not* disparage Western empirical knowledge. "For Indigenous scholars, empirical knowledge is still crucial, yet it is not their only way of knowing the world around them" (p. 58). At the same time, these scholars emphasize that the epistemological expansion they offer is no simple matter. Similarly to how Elbow points out the challenges involved in learning the believing game as a methodological approach, Wilson points out the discipline and commitment involved in other approaches to knowledge: "just as traditional western scientists have many years of formal and informal education emphasizing the linear way, the ability of any researcher, Indigenous or otherwise, to utilize intuitive logic requires a lifetime of practice and training" (p. 119).

Another skill requiring a "lifetime of practice and training" is that of practitioners who as skilled facilitators, mediators, and dialogue hosts, help create structures similar to "sitting around a fire" that allow people with different perspectives to arrive at shared truths together. Yet per an earlier quote from Elbow, a one-sided allegiance to the doubting game may not allow us to see the intelligence of practitioners who are engaging in the believing game – and in a similar manner, it may blind us to the wisdom of an Indigenous epistemology.

### **The Philosophy of Listening**

So, is "the believing game" just a fancy term for good listening skills, a reader may wonder? Possibly. Yet "good listening" is no simple matter, and can indeed be quite problematic within a culture of domination. As I have written before, in our society "listening is usually what the powerless are forced to do, and what the powerful refuse to do." Compulsory schooling, where students are forced to "listen to the teacher", begins to ingrain these power dynamics from an early age; yet "forced" listening, which often breeds "fake" listening, is quite different from "free" listening (Zubizarreta, 2017), the kind of authentic listening that bears the power to "hear one another into speech" (Morton, 1985, 127).

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non-deconstructionist postmodernism based on the experientialist orientation as "harmonious postmodernism", as distinct from "alienated postmodernism" (Spretnak, 1997, p.75).

Authentic listening is rare in a culture where “argument is war”. While feminist epistemology continues to uncover the various limitations of Eurocentric “rationality”, few feminist philosophers have explicitly focused on the dangers of the adversary method (for a notable exception, see Moulton, 1983; also Dotson, 2011). This makes Gemma Corradi Fiumara’s *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening* (1990) especially pertinent.

Corradi Fiumara delves into Heidegger’s work on early Greek thought, to explore how it came to be that logos is focused only on the “saying”, to the neglect of the “listening”. While “the mechanism of ‘saying without listening’ has multiplied and spread, constituting itself as a generalized form of domination and control” (1990, p.2) logos has become “a thinking primarily anchored to saying-without-listening” (p.3). As a result, “the vital need to be listened to must coexist as a subordinate with the derivatives of an increasingly arrogant logos, ready even to ignore anything that does not properly fit in with a logocentric system of knowledge” (p. 6).

Echoing Lakoff and Johnson, Corradi Fiumara points out how our epistemic culture “toils with the monotony of so-called theoretical contrasts which perhaps only represent an archaic warlike strategy transposed into the realm of epistemology” (p. 8). Parallel to Keating, she points to how this imbalance is continually being perpetuated: “The countless voices of our culture, in fact, always seem to propound wise and rational arguments, arousing in us a desire to appear as equally rational, and therefore to give assent by competing in that same style” (p. 10). In the process, our culture appears to require of us to “become adherents to an immense task of justifying a ‘logic’ that knows very well how to say practically everything and hardly knows how to listen” (p. 11).

In contrast, a philosophy of listening calls for “a relationship with thinking anchored in humility and faithfulness, an approach which is unheard-of in our current thinking, revolving around grasping, mastering, using” (p. 15). Parallel to Collins, the recovery of listening “aims at a possible conjugation of standpoints” (p. 17); in resonance with Wilson, Corradi Fiumara writes that as we recover “a more ‘circular’ way of thinking”, this may eventually lead us to “the rule of dwelling and coexistence.” (p. 16). Corradi warns that “there must be some problem of listening if we only hear from earth when it is so seriously endangered that we cannot help paying heed” (p. 6). Clearly, creating a regenerative culture of living in respectful relationship with the Earth and with one another will require much change, including a new relationship with listening.

## Our Own Metaphor

In 1968, anthropologist and cyberneticist Gregory Bateson hosted a small interdisciplinary conference at Burg Wartenstein, Austria on “The Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation”, and invited Mary Catherine Bateson, his daughter, to attend and create a record of the gathering. This eventually became the book “Our Own Metaphor” (1991, 1972), where Bateson describes how this invitational gathering was motivated by her father’s deep concern about the societal drift toward ecological disaster already apparent at that time, which he saw as “an epistemological problem, a deficit in what we are able to know and think” (Bateson, 1971, p. x). From Gregory Bateson’s perspective, the narrow rationality of goal-directed action, inherently dependent on a highly selective pattern of attending to some factors and ignoring others, “blinds us to the wider relationships and interconnectedness in which [...] we ourselves are embedded” (Guddemi, 2011, p. 471) with potentially lethal consequences.

In her prologues and epilogues, Mary Catherine Bateson reflects on her own insights regarding “the process of epistemological change that is still so deeply needed” (p. xi), which she conceives of as a “diverse and impassioned group process” (p. xii) that “benefits from disagreement and difference” while also allowing us to “move on from an adversarial view of truth” (p. 320). At the conference, she saw the “interweaving of ideas expressed by all who were present” (p. xvii) as a metaphor for what was being sought for the larger world: “a new pattern of inherently diverse information exchange and decision making, a new mode of conversation toward which we were feeling our way when we met.” (p. 314)

Celebrating feminism and other liberation movements that have made us “more sensitive to the necessity for multiple voices” (p. 321), Bateson writes:

The inclusion of women in decision-making bodies has tended to [...] legitimate the use of empathy as a mode of knowing. Because women have lived contingent lives, they have had to learn to deal with context; because they have often been precluded from focus on single goals, they have learned a wide-ranging responsiveness. (p. 323)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In her descriptions of ‘women’s experiences’, Bateson is likely drawing on her classic “Composing A Life” (1990), an in-depth narrative study of the lives of five professional women of various racialized backgrounds.

Bateson's indicating 'empathy as a mode of knowing' surfaces a common thread in the work of Elbow, Clinchy, Belenky et al, and Collins, while the related thread of 'empathy as a mode of evoking more inclusive perspectives' is key for Fleischer and Camp's work. It is also a key feature of Barbara Thayer-Bacon's work, where I will turn for the final stop on this journey.

### **Constructive Thinking and Relational (E)pistemology**

While I've had a long-standing acquaintance with a few of the theorists whose work I've explored above (most notably Mannheim and Lakoff and Johnson), most of the others are quite new to me. A fellow student at Fielding introduced me to Elbow's work in January of 2020; some months later, in the thick of doing research for this paper, I came across an article on "relational epistemology for scholar-activists" (Huffman, 2017) which led me to discover Barbara Thayer-Bacon, a prolific scholar in the field of philosophy of education.

Finding common ground between feminist standpoint theories and pragmatism, Thayer-Bacon builds on the work of John Dewey, Charlotte Haddock Seigfried, Lorraine Code, Sandra Harding and others, to develop a "pragmatist and feminist relational (e)pistemology" (2010). She also builds on work by Maxine Greene and Alison Jaggar to redefine critical thinking:

What would critical thinking look like if we allowed emotions, intuition, and imagination to be highlighted and valued in a description of critical thinking theory? What would happen if we admitted that none of us are capable of being neutral and objective, that all of us bring a subjective quality to critical thinking every time we attempt to think critically? We would have to begin by calling this redescribed critical thinking something else, to distinguish it from 'critical thinking' as we know it. (1988, p. 137).

I was delighted to discover that the term Thayer-Bacon offers for her redefinition of critical thinking, "constructive thinking", is explicitly drawn from Belenky et al's "constructive knowing", and is intended to emphasize that "we are all fallible, flawed, partial, contextual knowers in need of each others' insights" (1998, p. 137)

Thayer-Bacon has also developed a concept of "radical democratic communities always-in-the-making" (2001) where we "encourage each other to reach, to open, to seek, to create, to look wider" (p. 13) and where an ethic of care nurtures the creation of knowledge through "attending, valuing, being receptive to, and [engaging in] generous

consideration of the other” in order to “find ways to open up possibilities and bridge coalitions across differences” (p. 22).

Reminding us of Richard Rorty’s likening philosophers to poets whose work is “trying to envision the world in new ways [...] through the use of imagination and metaphors” (Thayer-Bacon, 1997, p. 239), the metaphors she offers as a feminist philosopher include the weaving of fishing nets, ones which are “in continual need of repairing and reweaving” (Thayer-Bacon, 2018) as well as, the piecing together of quilts, objects of both practical and aesthetic value, created via communal projects to which many individuals contribute, and which require a variety of materials and tools for their creation (Thayer-Bacon, 1999). While these are only two possible metaphors for a collaborative approach to knowledge creation, I am delighted to have stumbled across them, and for all of the various connections I have made along the way.

### **Con-cluding, or Closing Together**

Transforming a culture of domination is a huge undertaking. Attending to how we create knowledge together, and exploring how we might do so in a truly collaborative manner, is an often-overlooked yet essential aspect of this larger endeavor. I greatly appreciate all of these authors’ contributions to the larger web we are creating; my intention in each case has been to represent their work accurately, even as I have only explored a tiny piece of it.

I also appreciate whatever insights, questions, or comments that you as the reader may offer, to these larger nets of knowledge that we are all weaving together. I am curious to hear what has touched you or inspired you, as well as, what you see differently, from where you stand.

*to be continued... :-)*

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